

UNCLE OWEN'S WIFE

By COL. JOHN R. MUSICK.

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CHAPTER XII.

A DEATH-STRUGGLE.

Tom Nolan's dive was a low lunge near the river bank, not far from the landing at Collinsville. It was frequented by the gamblers and toughs who hunt the river towns, and in common southwestern parlance a "dogger." Tom Nolan was a desperate. He was six feet in height, weight 200, and the hero of several desperate fights. He had only one eye, the other having been gouged out in some fight, and he had a long scar on his cheek, which had evidently been made with a knife stroke.

He was in his shirt-sleeves, his brawny arms bare to the elbows, and a cigar in his mouth. There were six or eight desperadoes gathered in the "dogger," all discussing the two important topics of the day—the arrest of the negro, Black Sam, and the young Revenue officer, Frank Vernon. Our old acquaintances, American George, Capt. Mark, Shorty, Dutch, and Pat were present. The latter said: "I don't care who the hero of the day may say. I believe it was Frank Vernon as put up the nigger to do the dirty job."

"Why, Pat, you're off," said George; "why would the Revenue want the girl's throat cut?"

"Divil a bit do I know, any more than ye can tell why he stays about Collinsville."

"Py shemany Christmas, he has bundin' for dat moonshine still," began Dutch.

"Shut up Dutch, you don't know what you're talking about."

"You'd I, Shorty. Vell, I heard him say some things like dat himself, ven he was talkin' with some vellers on dat steamboat vat was at landin'."

"Frogs," said Shorty, suddenly starting up. "I tell you, we will have to keep an eye on that sipping rascal. He's gittin' too numerous round here. I saw him not an hour ago."

"Where?" asked George.

"Coming along the river bank. If he's hirin' niggers to assassinate people, the sooner he's lynched and thrown into the river the better. At this moment John Redgrave came in, and Shorty appealed to him, "What do you say about it, John?"

"About what?" John asked, staggering up to the bar and calling for a glass of "sure death."

"Why, this Revenue, this Frank Vernon, whose been tryin' to hire people assassinated."

"Hane Vernon, I say."

"With a glass of whisky in his hand, John turned on the crowd."

"We're law-abiding citizens; it's a duty we owe to society to see that this fellow is cared for."

"Don't let him have too much rope," put in George.

"No; just enough to hang himself," continued John. "As an honest American citizen, I feel it my duty to denounce Frank Vernon."

"You bet."

"Will he peach?"

"No; we've got the best legal talent in the country."

Mark turned and walked away a short distance from John, who, after draining his glass, turned upon some of the men who stood near, and said in a commanding tone:

"I'm a law-abiding citizen, and when I see such fellows as Frank Vernon going round scot free, I feel as if I could string him up myself."

"We all know you, John," cried George. "Of course you're a law-abiding citizen."

"Of course you are,"

"Just then the door opened and a stranger entered. He was a good-looking, slightly-built fellow, rather conspicuously dressed, and passed on the threshold of the saloon to a pair of gold-rimmed eye-glasses on his nose, then calmly surveyed the roughly-dressed throng in the apartment."

"Ah, good evening, gentlemen. I'm the proprietor of this establishment in" and the newcomer advanced to the bar.

"Ah, have you the nectar of the gods?" he asked.

"Dun know what that is."

"Kentucky whisky fresh from the corn; whisky not two days old, whisky, that the copper taste is not out of it."

"I've lots of kinds of whisky," Nolan answered. "Got it new and old."

"I want it fresh, new, deucedly new."

"I've got it not two days old."

"Ah, indeed—aren't you sure?"

"No mistake about it. The man I got it of told me he had just made it."

"Say, Green Perissimos, what ye want with new whisky?" asked George, curiously, who had never before heard of such a request.

"Old whisky is better."

"Ah, indeed; but I want it new. I want to taste it fresh from the still. Come up, my friends; come all, I will stand treat, you know."

The illicit distillers crowded about the bar, talking and drinking, the new comer treated three or four times and gradually got into the good graces of the men. As he drank and smoked they freely discussed with him the merits of different kinds of liquors, and told how they were made for his edification.

The door opened again and this time it was Frenchy. His keen black eyes swept the new comer from head to foot, then suddenly he cried out:

"Fools, stop your chatter; it's the Revenue, and rushing at him he struck him with his fist, knocked the white plug hat from his head, and his curly hair and side whiskers went with it."

"Frank Vernon!" roared John Redgrave.

"Frank Vernon, by all that's high and mighty," shouted American George.

"That's it! Don't let him get out of here alive."

Vernon, though his disguise was discovered, did not for a moment lose his presence of mind. Whipping out a revolver with one hand and a bowie knife with the other, he was ready for business, and it was there to meet him.

Nevertheless the newspapers were demanding his arrest and conviction for murder. He was called a saloon row, in which he was described as the aggressor. The papers boldly stated that he was under the influence of liquor, and his victim a man of excellent habits noted for sobriety, and a peaceable, worthy citizen.

"It's unfair, it's unjust," declared Vernon. "I did the act in self-defense, and had no intention of taking his life."

There was another who read the paper with equal indignation. It was Lillie Bunkles.

"He called a murderer," she almost screamed as she flung down the paper. "In a drunken row—it is false. I know Frank Vernon. He is a noble man, and could never harm anyone." She took up the paper and read further. The murderer, the paper stated, had fled, and was not yet caught, but they were confident he would not get out of the country.

Another read the story of the death of "Old Bourbon."

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"Indeed, I will not!" Lillie cried.

"Now, Miss Lillie, I have come to meet a young lady stopping with you, Miss Montrose."

Lillie was about to deny that any such person existed when by the merest chance she glanced up at the window and there sat the individual herself looking at them. Strange to say, she had been so careful all along to conceal herself, showed no disposition to do so now, but came slowly down the stairs to greet Uncle Owen, who advanced with outstretched arms to meet her in the main hall.

Lillie greeted from one to the other and said saucily, "I suppose I am not wanted, so an revoir."

"Malina, whispered Uncle Owen, "why did you leave me?"

"I was compelled to," she answered, with bowed head.

"Was it through fear of the Frenchman?"

"Yes."

"Do you know that you need never fear him again; he is gone to his account."

"I know it," and there was a slight of her head in answer.

"Won't you come back to me now?"

"Oh, I can't," she answered.

"Malina, not as my guest," he said, "but as mistress of my house—as my wife."

She was silent, and he continued to entreat her.

"Malina, I can never be happy without you; true, I am years older than you, but I never loved before."

Malina hesitated, for some reason, and asked time to consider his proposition. It was in a favorable tone, however, and

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